



The Oregonian

Still mad as hell and still taking it

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What I'm anxious to measure in the upcoming U.S. Senate race is the Democrats' willingness to look beyond the incumbent, Gordon Smith, and challenge the far more troubling issues that fall under politics -- and spending, pontificating and accountability -- as usual.

If they don't have the courage necessary for that challenge, a pox on those phony progressives.

Many of the local liberals -- and, all too often, candidates Steve Novick and Jeff Merkley -- are determined to turn the campaign into a debate over whether Smith's voting record aligns with Oregon's "values."

On Monday, Novick castigated Smith for standing "shoulder to shoulder with Bush on some of the worst policies of this administration." Merkley sounded similar themes in announcing his candidacy last week, blasting Smith's support for the war in Iraq even as the Oregon House speaker tried to explain away his 2003 vote for a resolution that praised "the courage of President George W. Bush" in starting it.

"I think Gordon Smith wins that argument," said Jeff Golden, a former Jackson County commissioner and a longtime host of a talk show on NPR. "We're in store for three months of TV ads, with grizzled, lovable Oregonians saying, 'I've voted for Democrats all my life, but gosh darn it, the country's in trouble now and I need to tell you about a great Oregonian, Gordon Smith.'"

"If you start arguing over the details of what Smith voted for and when he voted for it, the eyes glaze over," Golden continued. "He's smacking his lips for that kind of fight. If, instead, you say that Gordon's a nice man and a competent conductor on a train that's going over the cliff, then you're asking a whole different set of questions."

To wit: Who's determined to restrain federal spending? Who's committed to confronting the cost of health care and the plight of the middle class? And who's willing to break the corporate control of the system by advocating for public campaign financing?

"I can't get hopeful about our future unless we can get public financing started," Golden said. "Campaign contributors own the system. That means we need to be the campaign contributors as a public body. That's the linchpin. Pull that off and all sorts of things become possible."

Golden is not yet a candidate but he's written the book on addressing the voters like adults, not spoiled children: "As If We Were Grownups" is a collection of 10 "suicidal" speeches by a candidate who's willing to tell the VFW that military spending is too high; convince NARAL it should compromise on parental notification; and persuade the Anti-Drug Coalition of America that the "war on drugs" is an expensive, irrational and superficial failure.

(For more info on the book, check out www.asifweweregrownups.org.)

Golden has a provocative premise: Voters are much smarter than the consultants who attempt to manipulate them and the candidates content to talk down to them. They are fed up with "slogans and dogma and knee-jerk ideologies." The candidate who talks to them like adults -- and convinces them

public campaign financing, reduced military spending, and an end to local pork projects serve their self-interest -- won't connect with the corporate power brokers, the public employee unions or the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

Just everyone else.

It's a challenging notion . . . and I'm anxious to see if the Democratic candidates are up to it. Will they play it safe, focusing on fundraising and George Bush, or risk the dangers inherent in demanding a mature discussion about what must change to benefit our country and our politics?

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